

MOUNTAINEERING *CHIC*: WHERE HAVE ALL THE WOMEN GONE?

BY DEVON O'NEIL // PHOTOS BY JIMMY CHIN



If there's one thing every female ski mountaineer agrees on, it's that the number of women chasing big, technical lines around the world has always been small. Traditionally, one generation naturally paved the way for the next, but in recent years, as some of the most successful skiers move on in life, a disconcerting realization has begun to spread: Very few younger women are in line to replace them.

The reasons for the dwindling tribe "come up in conversation," says Utah-based pro skier Kim Havell, 37, a veteran of 15 international expeditions. "I don't think any of us have come to any conclusions."

With the exception of Italian Giulia Monego, 30, (*The Lucky One*, Nov. 2011) almost every pro with the requisite technical skills in both climbing and skiing, as well as the desire to venture deep into untraveled lands for first descents, is nearing or older than 40. Some of them, like

Hilaree O'Neill, 39, and Kit DesLauriers, 42, have children (two, in their cases). That fact alone has led O'Neill, one of the most accomplished female expedition skiers of the past decade, to scale back her trips from three to one each year.

Another factor is industry focus and funding. Freeskiing stars once gravitated to the cutting-edge pull of ski mountaineering—DesLauriers won back-to-back world titles on the World Freeskiing Tour before skiing the Seven Summits (finishing in 2006), an accomplishment that substantially elevated her profile. But now, the industry's funding has shifted—and this doesn't bode well for expedition-style skiers. Now, compensation often depends less on actual achievements than on "how many people are watching you," DesLauriers says. O'Neill concurs: "You can make a lot more money in freeskiing now than you can skiing big peaks in Asia."



Clockwise from left: Kasha Rigby gearing up for the first descent of Redommaine (20,047 feet), China, in October 2009; It's lonely at the top—especially if you're a woman; Expedition veteran Kit DesLauriers on the Grand Teton, WY; "I don't really need to get super exposed on the descent, and it seems that's the level of ski mountaineering that gets attention." —Ingrid Backstrom.

BLOWN IN

Consider 33-year-old Ingrid Backstrom. Skilled enough with an axe and crampons to have participated in ski-mountaineering expeditions to Baffin Island and Pakistan, the North Face-sponsored skier still spends most of her time filming high-speed descents in powder. "I don't necessarily feel the need to ski the gnarliest lines out there—it's not worth it to me," she says. "I like to hike up and ski down fun, aesthetic lines—I enjoy the challenge of the uphill, but I don't really need to get super exposed on the descent, and it seems that's the level of ski mountaineering that gets attention."



Ingrid Backstrom on the 2009 Shangri La Expedition, China. // Photo: Jimmy Chin

All-women first-descent trips, which featured the likes of O'Neill, Kasha Rigby, Jesse James Davenport, Victoria Jamieson and Melissa McManus a decade ago, are virtually non-existent now.

"It seems like nobody's around: nobody's doing it," O'Neill says, noting many of the most talented women—including Kim Grant, Margaret Wheeler and Kirsten Kremer—have shifted their focus to guiding. One pro skier (who wished to remain anonymous) explains that some female pros feel threatened by younger skiers, fearing that newcomers further dilute the limited pool of sponsorship. This could be one reason the community is smaller now, she says: "We were hurting

ourselves, but I think that's changing."

Most of the women interviewed for this story believe that for the sport to broaden its reach, established pros will have to play a grassroots role. O'Neill entered the world of professional ski mountaineering by chance, tagging along with Teton-based guide Mark Newcomb on a 20-below morning in January 1999 to ski the über-steep Bubble Fun Couloir on Buck Mountain, which ends in a 200-foot cliff. She then fibbed about her winter camping experience to sneak onto a North Face expedition to India with Jeremy Nobis and Rick Armstrong, and her career took off from there. Now, she returns the favor. A dozen or

so times a winter, women in her hometown of Telluride ask to tag along in the backcountry, and O'Neill obliges every time, for free. "You can't really ask someone who's waiting tables to shell out seven grand to go ski G2 in Pakistan," she says—but she figures if a woman builds her skill set locally, she'll be that much closer to pursuing larger objectives.

On that note, every female pro acknowledged plenty of women getting after it in their backyards. But among the eight interviewed for this story, only DesLauriers was planning a major first-descent attempt—the west face of 9,950-foot Mount Aspiring in New Zealand (which she ultimately postponed). "It's a classic alpine climb, so the conditions will have to be just right," she said. "Some say it may never be skied, but that is the kind of realm we are moving into for steep first descents."

Kasha Rigby, meanwhile, wrote in an email that she'd struck out searching for fall ski partners this year, and was instead planning a climbing expedition. "In determination to continue accessing the mountains wild, I am working random jobs in random places, right now in Aspen, next Alaska, then L.A. (of all places), to fuel my travel," she wrote. "I'm looking for ski partners going cool places, if you hear of any." ■

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LIVING PROOF THAT SIMPLICITY SAVES LIVES

I was a 16-year-old kid who knew very little about the backcountry. Two years ago a BCA Tracker saved my life. I was buried for eight minutes and I was dug up by friends whom I consider family today. My goal is to become a guide so that I will have the ability to protect people like my former self. Thanks to BCA for saving my life and giving me inspiration.

— Randall Stacy, Ipswich, MA

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